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NARRATIVE OF SOJOURER TRUTH (I)
A NARRATIVE OF A FEMALE SLAVE IN THE NORTH

Keiko Noguchi

I. Introduction

Narrative of Sojourner Truth, first published in 1850 and revised and expanded in 1875 and 1884, is hard to categorize into any specific literary genre. One may hesitate, in the first place, to call it a literary work at all; the first part consists of a story of Truth transcribed by Olive Gilbert, and the latter half called "Book of Life" compiled by another amanuensis Frances Titus, which presents almost a collage of excerptions from various letters and periodicals that describe Truth or report on her speeches, and of her photographs and many signatures of distinguished people of the time; Titus added to this, moreover, "A Memorial Chapter" after Truth's death in 1883. Written in the third person, this slave narrative, with occasional comments or complementary explanations by the two amanuenses, is not a "genuine" autobiography, as most of the slave narratives are; nor is it a biography which usually chronicles a person's life from birth to death, for the *Narrative* is not always in a chronological order and it seems that Truth is not a passive informant, but tries to control her own narrative while both Gilbert and Titus appear satisfied with being invisible as her scribes.

As Nell Irvin Painter suggests in her article, "Representing Truth: Sojourner Truth's Knowing and Becoming Known" (1994), Truth's *Narrative* has not been treated as a work of ex-slave literature for "[more] than a century and a quarter after its publication" (474).[1] Although feminist historians have often shed light on her Akron speech as the symbolic one that combines race and gender, *Narrative of Sojourner Truth* has not yet found a proper place in the well explored literary genre of salve narratives. There seems to be several reasons for this long

neglect. First of all, the book as a whole is not well organized; it gives a look of a house with many annexed rooms that have been added one after another without any controlling design. Since Truth was illiterate and the reader must hear her voice through the intermediating writers' interpretation of what she spoke, it is sometimes difficult to determine who speaks, Truth or Gilbert/Titus, or where and to what degree the two writers reflect their own thoughts.[2] Truth was essentially a speaker and the book is based on what Truth had dictated to Gilbert (and Titus), but more than half of the book is a sort of collage, as I have mentioned in the opening paragraph, a hotchpotch of newspapers, magazines, letters, essays, songs, autographs, photos, and obituaries. The reader is likely to be at a loss how to take this book.

Truth's narrative, however, has its own originality and power to attract the reader. It is something more than mere historical material. In spite of its seemingly loose composition and rough-constructed text, it attains the inerasable visibility of the author, Sojourner Truth, unlike other stories by black women such as Harriet Wilson's *Our Nig* (1859) which had fallen into oblivion until Henry Louis Gates, Jr., accidentally unearthed it in 1983 or Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in a Life of a Slave Girl, Written by Herself* (1861) whose authorship had long been ascribed to its editor Lydia Maria Child despite the assuring phrase "written by herself" added to the title. Truth's *Narrative* has secured its authenticity despite the lack of integrated narrative viewpoint. What makes Truth's narrative unique in the literature of ex-slaves? This paper examines the *Narrative* as a slave narrative with special focus on her life as a slave girl in the North, and thereby illumines its characteristic features.

II. *Narrative of Sojourner Truth* as a Slave Narrative

The 1850 edition of Truth's narrative is a small book of 128 pages (Painter, *Sojourner Truth* 110-11), and covers her life from the period of being a slave in New York to the time when she became a travelling lecturer. It was published for two major purposes: to preach faith in Christian God and to gain money by selling its copies to sustain her life.

Although the first version includes no forthright antislavery speech, it roughly follows the tradition of slave narratives. As Frederick Douglass emphasizes the change of his name as the moment of his transformation from a bondman into a free man, Truth also dramatizes the moment when she names herself Sojourner Truth, casting off the old one, Isabella, that signifies her state of servitude.[3]

Isabella was born a slave, and was sold at the auction like cattle at about the age of nine, being separated from her parents, James and Betsy, whose 12 or 13 children were all sold away from them one after another. Isabella served several masters until she came to the Dumont family, the last place, before she escaped from slavery in 1826. She received no education like many slaves and free blacks in antebellum America[4] so that she had no means to count time; the *Narrative* begins with the statement that "[she] does not know in what year she was born" (9), an opening announcement common in slave narratives. Because of this her description of time is ambiguous as she tells about her childhood:

> How long this state of things continued, we are unable to say, as Isabella had not then sufficiently cultivated her organ of time to calculate years, or even weeks or hours. But she thinks her mother must have lived several years after the death of Master Charles. She remembers going to visit her parents some three or four times before the death of her mother, and a good deal of time seemed to her to intervene between each visit. (13)

Although she criticizes the deprivation of education of black people, Isabella does not mourn for the lack of education so bitterly as Douglass does in the opening passage of his slave narrative: "A want of information concerning my own was a source of unhappiness to me even during childhood. The white children could tell their ages. I could not tell why I ought to be deprived of the same privilege" (41). Her way of telling this inability is sometimes humorous as when she describes her struggle to get back her son Peter who was illegally sold to Alabama. As the lawyer assured her that he would be back in twenty-four hours, she visited his office several times a day, since "Isabella …

[had] no idea of this space of time":

> Once, when the servant opened the door and saw her, she said, in a tone expressive of much surprise, 'Why, this woman's come again!' She then wondered if she went too often. When the lawyer appeared, he told her the twenty-four hours would not expire till the next morning. (35)

The episode conveys Isabella's total lack of temporal information on the one hand, and it also marks, on the other, her strong motherly affection and toughness to open the door of justice. It is indeed astonishing for an illiterate black woman and former slave to take a legal procedure and to win the case (Mabee 40).[5] Whenever facing difficulties, she throws herself into them with a firm belief that God will help her.

The major part of the 1850 narrative centers on her religious pilgrimage from her childhood when she was taught about God in heaven by her mother, through the experience of revelation, knowing Jesus as the mediator between Isabella and God, and the participation in the evangelical reform movement in New York City, to the exodus to the east out of the city as modern Gomorrah. Yet it also gives a narrative of slavery. Truth illustrates how cruel and inhuman the slavery system is even in the North. Her narrative offers precious testimony to the existence of slavery in the North that boasted of democracy and freedom in contrast to the slavocracy of the South. Harriet Beecher Stowe deals with the subject in *Minister's Wooing* (1859) whose story is set in New England, the very center of democratic American culture. The novel might have been influenced by Truth's narrative. The *Narrative* details the reality of Northern slavery from the viewpoint of Isabella, a slave born in Ulster County, New York. Her father's wretchedness in his old age is especially impressive. Being blind and crippled, he is unable to support himself and ends his life alone in filth and starvation that terrifies even an old ex-slave woman:

> Soan . . . lacked the courage to undertake a job of such seeming magnitude, fearing she might herself get sick . . . and with great

> reluctance, and a heart swelling with pity . . . she felt obliged to leave him in his wretchedness and filth. And shortly after her visit, this faithful slave, this deserted wreck of humanity, was found on his miserable pallet, frozen and stiff in death. . . . Yes, he had died, chilled and starved, with none to speak a kindly word, or do a kindly deed for him, in that last dread hour of need! (17)

The narrative tone becomes high and intense to record both the helpless father's agonies and his daughter's sorrow by inserting Isabella's mourning in the first person: "And most piteous were the lamentations of the poor old man. . . . *Oh, how he* DID *cry!* I HEAR it *now*—and remember it as well as if it were but yesterday—*poor old man!!!*" (15). The sudden insertion of the present tense that suggests her indelible memory of pains reminds us of Douglass's description of the deep gashes on his feet in which he can put the pen he is writing his narrative with. And the use of capitalized letters and italicized words and exclamation points is a literary strategy employed in Walker's *Appeal*; these literary devices all express her emotions that still well up in the heart and the writer's attempt to delineate what words alone cannot covey.

Isabella herself was not immune from brutal treatment. Her real hardship began with the Nealys, her second master and mistress. Here a special problem she had as a slave comes out; since she was born and grew up in the district where Low Dutch was spoken, she could speak only Dutch. The Nealys, on the other hand, spoke only English. Consequently, Isabella had hard time in communicating with the new mistress and could not perform what she was told to do, and this angered the Nealys, resulting in severe punishment:

> When he had tied her hands together before her, he gave her the most cruel whipping she was ever tortured with. He whipped her till the flesh was deeply lacerated, and the blood streamed form her wounds—and the scars remain to the present day, to testify to the fact. (18)

A scene of a slave being whipped with his/her hands tied and his/her

back bared is frequently described in ex-slave stories. It often presents a symbol of the terrible anguish that a slave had suffered. Compared to the dramatic and sensational scene Douglass presents in the opening chapter of his narrative, however, the passage quoted above gives no such sensation. Nor is it sexualized, either, to engender a picture of the master's atrocious violence imposed on the naked body of a female black. Rather it seems to reflect a patterned abolitionist rhetoric that had permeated antebellum America; the abolitionist Gilbert might have been familiar with such rhetoric to accuse slavery. And yet, if we remember that Isabella is punished here for her inability to understand English, we find the irrationality of the slaveholder intensified. Because of this language problem, she, as a slave, was doubly tormented.

III. Things That Are Not for the "Public Ear"

One more thing that needs special mention concerning a female slave is the issue of sexuality. As Harriet Jacobs's autobiography centers on sexual abuses by her master, Dr. Flint, black female slaves were likely to be subject to sexual exploitation. Although Truth tells nothing that is related with the theme, a close reading of her narrative gives us some hints at it. Isabella's last master is John Dumont, a relatively "humane" slaveholder. He appreciates and praises her honest and hard labor: "she could do as much work as half a dozen common people, and do it well, too" (21). His open praise causes jealousy of his wife, Sally Dumont, and a white female servant called Kate; the two women together constantly bully Isabella. Although their wicked scheme to disgrace her is exposed by the kind-hearted girl, Gertrude, the Dumonts' eldest daughter, Mr. Dumont's laudation and protection of Isabella led to her endless toiling because she adored her master and was anxious to answer to his favor by accomplishing as much work as possible: "At this time she looked upon her master as a *God*" (22).

The structure of the family relationship—the patriarch, John Dumont, and his petted slave girl, and the mistress with her supporter/collaborator, Kate, hostile to the slave—is similar to that of the

Bellmonts in Harriet Wilson's *Our Nig*. As Frado, the heroine of this autobiographical novel, devotes herself to serving James who cares for her, even diminishing her already lessened sleep, Isabella tries to respond to Mr. Dumont's praise by working harder than ever before: "Her ambition and desire to please were so great, that she often worked several nights in succession, sleeping only short snatches, as she sat in her chair." And her exertions to please the master rendered her alienated from her fellow slaves: they called her "*white folks' nigger*" (22).

As sexual abuse is suspected in *Our Nig*,[6] it is more than probable that behind the patronage of a slave girl by a male member of the family lies sexual exploitation. Isabella, however, keeps silent about this except for implying that unspeakable things happened to her as the author of *Our Nig* does, saying in its preface that "I have purposely omitted what would most provoke shame in our good anti-slavery friends at home":

> From this source [Mrs. Dumont] arose a long series of trials in the life of our heroine, which we must pass over in silence, some from motives of delicacy, and others, because the relation of them might inflict undeserved pain on some now living, whom [Izabella] remembers only with esteem and love; therefore, the reader will not be surprised if our narrative appear somewhat tame at this point, and may rest assured that it is not for want of facts, as the most thrilling incidents of this portion of her life are from various motives suppressed. (20)

Considering the Victorian era when the book was published and the fact that its readers were mostly white middle-class women, the "most thrilling incidents" that "we must pass over in silence" because of "delicacy" are clearly suggestive of sexual matters. Isabella details the reasons for her silence later again in the pages called "Gleanings":

> There are some hard things that crossed Isabella's life while in slavery, that she has no desire to publish, for various reasons. First, because the parties from whose hands she suffered them have rendered up their account to a higher tribunal, and their innocent

> friends alone are living, to have their feelings injured by the recital; secondly, because they are not all for the public ear, from their very nature; thirdly, and not least, because, she says, were she to tell all that happened to her as a slave . . . it would seem to others, especially the uninitiated, so unaccountable, so unreasonable, and what is usually called so unnatural, . . . they would not easily believe it. (55-56)

Here Truth gives three reasons for silencing certain incidents. In the first place, she is afraid of injuring the feelings of her friends who are still alive by revealing them. The second reason is that they are not for "the public ear, from their very nature." The third one is related with the second: since the suppressed incidents are of such unpleasant nature as to disturb readers, especially "the uninitiated," so that, if she recited them, they would not believe them and call her "a liar"; she does not want to sacrifice her character for the sake of "veracity" (56).

According to Painter who wrote a biography of Sojourner Truth, Sally Dumont had been already dead when Truth and Gilbert were working on the *Narrative* in the late 1840s, while her husband John Dumont was still alive (Explanatory Notes 248). Combining this fact and what the narrative accounts, she determines that "Isabella was abused sexually by Sally, not John Dumont." In order to support this view, Painter further mentions an incident that a white upper-class woman "fondled and kissed her" when she joined the Kingdom of Matthias (249).[7]

Yet the possibility of sexual relationship between John Dumont and Isabella cannot be denied.[8] Referring to Dr. Flint's sexual pursuit of Linda in Jacobs's *Incidents*, Margaret Washington compares "the rift between Isabella and Mrs. Dumont" to Mrs. Flint's jealousy and hostility toward Linda, and concludes that "Isabella apparently accepted Dumont's advances" (62). Carleton Mabee, another biographer of Truth, remarks the possibility that at least some of her five children were fathered by Dumont (8).[9] The incidents that are suppressed in the narrative because they are not for "the public ear" evidently suggest of sexual matter.

IV. Conlusion

It is significant that Truth ends her first 1850 version of *Narrative* with Dumont's apology, though she could have concluded her narrative, following the tradition of domestic fiction, with finding a home, though temporal, in the Northampton Association, a utopian community in Massachusetts, that she found congenial to her. When she met him for the last time in 1849, Dumont voiced his repent, saying that "slavery was the wickedest thing in the world, the greatest curse the earth had ever felt" but that he did not realize the truth when he was a slaveholder and thought "it was as right as holding any other property" (84-85). Truth, who has been long disenchanted of Dumont, makes rather sarcastic comment:

> [He] taught us not to lie and steal, when *he* was stealing all the time himself and did not know it! Oh! how sweet to my mind was this confession! And what a confession for a master to make to a slave! A slaveholding master turned to a brother! Poor old man, may the Lord bless him, and all slaveholders partake of this spirit! (85)

When we put this ending in the context of the sexual abuse we have examined in the previous section, the triumphant tone in the passage seems to substitute for what she had to conceal for several motives.

Notes

[1] The ex-slave narratives emerged as a genre in the 1840s; best-selling ones like those by Frederick Douglass, William Wells Brown, and Henry Bibbs appeared in this period (Painter, "Representing Truth" 472).

[2] Jean Fagan Yellin points out the problems in determining the authenticity of speeches and writings by illiterate ex-slaves: "Because Sojourner Truth was illiterate, her words have come down to us—if at all—as transcribed by others. The varied ways that her language has been rendered suggest the enormous influence of her transcribers in shaping the texts we have today" (77).

[3] The present writer calls her Izabella when referring to her life as a slave and uses Sojourner Truth, when referring to her life after she began to call herself

by the new name in 1843 and also when referring to her as the "author" of the *Narrative*.

[4] New York State did not prohibit slaves from learning to read and write even when Truth was a child, but it was only "a few very fortunate slaves" who could attend schools, from the late eighteenth century until 1827 when slavery was abolished in New York (Painter, "Representing Truth" 465). According to Mabee, when Truth became free, there were schools for blacks or self-help societies to teach blacks how to read and write in New York City but no record is found to show that she "attended any black schools, or participated in any abolitionist or self-help societies" (26).

[5] Truth took a case again to the court when she was charged with poisoning Mr. Pierson who died of illness in the Kingdom of Matthias. She won the case and even gained 400 dollars from the Folgers for slandering.

[6] For the discussion about sexual abuses in *Our Nig*, see Noguchi 9-13.

[7] Painter argues this point more in detail in her biography (14-17).

[8] Mabee also remarks that the sexual relation between the master and the slave girl cannot be denied: "Altogether, while there is no evidence that there were any sexual relations between Dumont and Isabella, nevertheless the emotional ties between them seem unusually close for a master and slave, and a sexual relationship between them cannot be ruled out" (9).

[9] We have to reconsider why she could leave her children in the Dumont house in the light of this possibility when she pursued her life as a free woman in New York City. If we regard it as evidence of her selfishness or lack of motherly affection as some critics suggest, we might misread her character.

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